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ABSTRACT

Quality circles are groups of people performing similar work that meet regularly to improve their work settings. Since the quality circle is a means for organizational change, it is helpful to place the concept within the literature of organizational change in the field of educational administration. With the use of quality circles, change occurs at two stages: (1) in the process of making decisions, and (2) as an outcome of the decisions made. The quality circle concept can be compared to similar change programs, such as autonomous work groups and participative decision-making processes. The role of middle management, individual differences, diffusion, and persistence have emerged as significant issues in organizational change. Problems relating to these issues that surface with quality circles are the individual's decision to participate, problem selection, and the degree of satisfaction for circle members. The use of quality circles in educational administration provides a natural field setting in which the study of group problem-solving may be advanced. The literature on quality circles is sparse, and more investigation and analysis of the concept are warranted if it is to be applied to the field of education. (MD)

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QUALITY CIRCLES AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

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Public Schools today are characterized by the widespread use of groups in various contexts. Autonomous work groups, conventional work groups, and decision-making and problem-solving groups are among the many types common to educational organizations. Perhaps more than at any other time, school administrators are recognizing the potential power of groups, and attempting to harness it in order to further the goals of the school system.

A quality circle is a group of people performing similar work in an organization, who meet once a week to try to improve their work setting. Quality circles are usually initiated by administrators of an organization or after an organization has done a feasibility study on the practical uses of quality circles for organizational problem solving. Once a commitment has been made, the next step is to select and train facilitators. The facilitators, in conjunction with administrators, determine areas within the organization for implementation, and the first-level administrators or supervisors are approached about becoming "circle leaders." After the leaders are trained, they inform the individuals in their area that they are interested in forming a circle, and ask for volunteers. If enough are interested, a circle is formed, and meetings scheduled. The first few meetings are devoted to training circle members in the various problem-solving techniques, setting priorities among problems, and "fishbone diagrams," which is essentially a visual display of a causal model of a problem. As the group progresses, the time spent in training decreases, and the time spent in actual problem-solving increases. School systems might vary in the number of constraints placed on the types of problems selected, however, labor-management issues should be avoided.

In order to focus our discussion of quality circles in educational administrations, it may be helpful to place them within the context of organizational literature. It would appear that the literature which is most relevant for understanding a quality circles program is the literature on organizational change.

Quality circles are, in a broad sense, a plan for organizational change. This change occurs on at least two levels: (1) change in the process of making decisions, and (2) change as an outcome of decisions made. One way of providing a context for circles as instruments of change is to compare them to other similar programs of change. The similarities may stem from the common intellectual heritage shared by quality circles and many other forms of change (Nelson, 1981). This common heritage includes both the Human Relations school, as expressed by Likert (1967), Argyris (1962), and McGregor (1960), and the Human Resources model, as outlined by Miles (1965). The Human Relations school is concerned with management

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becoming "democratic rather than authoritarian, employee-centered, concerned with human relations rather than bureaucratic rules" (Perrow, 1979). The Human Resources model is based on the premise that "all organization members constitute valuable resources, and we should learn to develop, top, and free these resources" (Perrow, 1979).

One type of program which bears some similarity to quality circles is the autonomous work group, which has been described by Goodman and Lawler (1977) and Goodman (1979). Circles are similar to autonomous work groups in that they are both composed of groups based on organizational units; in both cases the groups are given increased decision-making responsibility. Autonomous work groups, however, are a much more extreme form of change than quality circles. For example, in autonomous work group programs, the role of the first-line administrator is greatly diminished, whereas in quality circles the role changes very little. Finally autonomous work groups are often characterized by changes in the task structure, such as job assignment rotation. Task structure is generally not affected by quality circles. We can see, then, that on a number of important dimensions, autonomous work groups are a much more radical form of change than quality circles.

Participative decision-making (PDM) is another type of organizational change which can be used to sharpen our perception of quality circles. We should not, however, compare PDM with quality circles, because it is a concept which includes many forms of change, including circles. Locke and Schweiger (1979) define PDM as "participation in the process of reaching decisions," which appears to include quality circles. They argue that the three major parameters of a PDM program are (1) whether participation is forced or voluntary, (2) whether the structure is formal or informal, and (3) whether employee representation is direct or indirect. Using these parameters, quality circles can be described as voluntary, formal, and indirect. According to Locke and Schweiger (1979), a PDM program is indirect if not all organization members are directly involved.

The final observation brings us full circle in our discussion as to the relationship of quality circles to the literature on organizational change. Quality circles certainly exhibit some unique features as a change program, the concept owes much, both philosophically and operationally, to previous theories and programs of change. It would seem likely, therefore, that issues which have been significant for other programs of change would also be important for quality circles. Several such issues have been identified by Goodman and Lawler (1977). The role of middle management is one such issue. As many forms of change are initiated at the top of the organization for implementation at the bottom, middle management is often forgotten. This approach ignores the crucial role of middle managers in developing and sustaining change. A second issue is the impact of individual differences among organizational personnel. While change programs are generally intended to fulfill certain individual needs, such needs are not uniformly distributed across individuals. This sometimes results in neutral or even negative reactions to the change process. Finally, the issues of diffusion and persistence have proven to be important for change programs. Diffusion refers to the

spreading of the change across organizational units, while persistence refers to the length of time the change lasts. There is accumulating evidence that many changes neither diffuse nor persist (Walton, 1980).

It has been suggested that quality circles are in several ways similar to other forms of organizational change. Since the issues (role of middle management, individual differences, diffusion and persistence) have emerged as significant for many forms of change, it would appear that they are important in the circles context. The issues are important for circles, therefore, we should focus on several problems which relate to them.

The first problem is the individual's decision whether or not to participate in circles. There are several reasons why this problem is important. First, since circle membership is voluntary, the program will not even exist unless individuals decide to participate. From the individual differences perspective, the prospects of circle membership will appear more attractive to some individuals than others. Second, from the perspective of persistence, it is important to understand the reasons why people decide to participate. This is because, after people have participated in a program for some period of time, they tend to re-evaluate their participation.

If their experiences have not been consistent with their expectations, they are less likely to continue participating (Goodman and Dean, 1982). This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in many circles, since circle programs advocate multiple goals. The implications of this phenomenon for persistence are quite evident as an individual may join to pursue one subset of these goals, and find that the circle is in fact focusing on others. The third reason why the decision to participate is significant is that it is part of the mechanism by which the program diffuses throughout the organization. As previously indicated, diffusion is a process which leads to persistence.

The second problem is problem selection. That is, why do circles choose the specific problems they work on? The process of problem selection is significant because it constrains, to a large extent, the impact of the circle on the organization. Even if the circle members are good at problem-solving, if their efforts are directed at unimportant or insoluble problems, their impact on the organization will be slight. The problem selection process affects persistence in at least two ways. First, the problems selected by the circles will affect the degree of sponsorship of the program by line management. Sponsorship has been shown to play a large part in the persistence of change programs (Goodman and Dean, 1982). Second, the circle members may become disenchanted with the program if they are not able to select problems which they feel are important. This may lead to their quitting the program if and when they re-evaluate their participation. Thus, it appears that problem selection may have a significant effect on the persistence of the program.

The third and final problem is the degree of satisfaction with the quality circle program members. There are a number of reasons to examine the aspects of circles which lead to satisfaction. First, increasing satisfaction among participants is a primary reason that circles are implemented. It could be said that the level of satisfaction among participants is a partial measure of the effectiveness of the program. Their level of satisfaction also affects the decision of members to continue participating in circles, which has been sug-

gested is related to the persistence of the program. Finally, mamber satisfaction will affect the rate of diffusion, which also affects persistence. This is because prospective new circle members will partially base their decision to join on information provided by current circle members.

In summary, what have we learned about quality circles? First of all, we have learned that organization members are primarily motivated to join circles by a desire for greater involvement, and a perception that circles can make needed improvements in the organization. Those who do not not join circles usually doubt that circles will have any concrete effect, and/or are satisfied with their current level of organizational involvement.

In deciding which problems to work on, circle mambers tend to focus on creating change. They prefer problems whose solutions would have the greatest impact on productivity, working conditions, quality, and frustration in their jobs. The process of selecting problems in quality circles is somewhat unusual, in that care is taken to involve everyone in the process, and to avoid domination by one or a few individuals. The satisfaction of members is an important outcome variable. Participation in group decision-making is the prime determinant of satisfaction with an acceptance of the group decision.

The use of quality circles in educational administration offers both theoretical and practical reasons for further evaluation. They provide a natural field setting in which the study of problem-solving groups (particluarly in education) may be advanced.

In general, the literature on quality circles is rather sparse; however, more in depth investigation and analysis of the concept is warranted, if it is to be applied to the field of education.

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